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# U.S. readies for war over a tree

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The U.S. almost provoked another war in Korea last week.

Culminating months of escalating tension along the truce line separating the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) from U.S.-controlled South Korea, Washington mobilized a heavily armed air and naval armada in order to cut down a tree in the demilitarized zone.

A war appears to have been narrowly averted due to the great restraint shown by the DPRK, even as it sharply criticized U.S. belligerency and expressed readiness to defend itself.

The DPRK has been warning throughout the year that the tinderbox situation along the military demarcation line could get out of hand any moment. On Aug. 5 the DPRK issued a very strong statement denouncing the latest U.S. provocations, including new war games, the introduction of additional weapons and warlike propaganda.

As usual, the U.S. ignored the DPRK statement, ultimately taking steps that led to the near-war situation of Aug. 21.

The U.S. version of events, of course, is different. According to the White House, the latest grave incident began unexpectedly Aug. 18 when two U.S. officers were slain by DPRK soldiers while peacefully engaged in the supervision of a work detail that was trimming a tree in the truce village of Panmunjom, a joint security area in the demilitarized zone, where personnel of both sides are permitted.

Precisely why the DPRK would commit such an act was never explained, even though it contradicts the exceptionally correct attitude the north has adopted ever since the zone was created in the aftermath of the Korean War 23 years ago.

## TIMELY 'MAYAGUEZ'

What followed was a virtual recreation of the Mayaguez incident last year when the U.S. massively retaliated because Cambodia legally took a U.S. ship in tow for violating its waters. Instead of trying to reduce tension, the U.S. moved to a war footing in Korea, reinforcing its military forces in South Korea and placing them on a combat-ready alert.

South Korean dictator Pak Jung Hi took advantage of the situation to demand in an Aug. 19 speech that it was time to use "a stick" against the north—that is, to carry out a military attack, which seemed possible at the time. Pak, experiencing extreme difficulty in retaining control over increasing opposition at home, despite having great repressive powers at his disposal, is thought to entertain visions of recreating the Korean War in order to remain in power.

Despite Washington's chronology, a New York Times reporter revealed Aug. 21 that the tree cutting episode actually began early in August, not on the 18th. "The North Koreans had turned away a United Nations Command party seeking to cut down the tree about two weeks ago because it reportedly blocked the view of the United Nations Command Post at the southern end of the security zone," the Times stated. (The U.S. operates in South Korea under cover of the UN.)

Instead of discussing the issue with DPRK representatives, as is mandatory at the jointly administered armistice zone when there is a difference of views, the U.S. decided to trim or cut down the tree on Aug. 18, during which time an altercation developed leading to casualties on both sides. Such a conflict was almost inevitable—and the U.S. obviously knew it when it sent the tree-trimming crew to do its work, under command of two American officers, who were subsequently killed in the melee.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) of the DPRK issued a statement Aug. 19 contradicting the U.S. version of the event. The DPRK account was not mentioned by the U.S. news media, which contented itself

with a Bicentennial orgy of jingoist one-sided reportage.

According to KCNA, after the U.S.-led group came with axes to cut down the tree—which, incidentally, the DPRK side had planted and nurtured—four North Korean security personnel approached them and, as in the incident earlier in the month, declared that the tree must not be felled without prior consultation "with our side."

The DPRK request was met with invective and physical assault. KCNA says the four were beaten and an ax was thrown at them. When the North Koreans responded in self-defense, KCNA said, the U.S. side called in reinforcements, conveniently waiting nearby, with photographers in the background.

The injuries and deaths occurred during the conflict that followed. The axes used in the incident were all of Austrian make, used by the U.S. side, not by the DPRK. The North Koreans who used these weapons obtained them during the melee from the U.S. side. During a meeting of both sides Aug. 19, the DPRK representative displayed one of the axes as evidence of from which side the weapons came.

## SHOW OF FORCE

As soon as the confrontation took place Washington decided on making a huge show of force instead of attempting to reach some understanding about the matter, even though the Ford administration well knows that the DPRK is not the kind of country to be intimidated by U.S. threats and that any U.S. aggression would be replied to in kind.

The question is, why, then, did Washington in the first place provoke an incident that could have been avoided, then use it as a pretext to virtually start a war, ignoring a most reasonable reply from the DPRK? And why did the administration then rethink the situation and decide to permit it to simmer down?

## Guardian cables DPRK

The Guardian Committee to Support Korean Reunification sent a cable to President Kim Il Sung of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea Aug. 20 deploring recent U.S. war provocations and expressing support "for the Korean people and their right to defend their national dignity and sovereignty."

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